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ABSTRACT

A descriptive study was conducted that examined urban school counseling professionals' perception of school restructuring activities such as school-based management, community-school partnerships, and school-based family counseling. Professional school counselors (N=102) working in urban schools were surveyed. Several implications can be drawn from the results. School counselors could benefit by becoming more knowledgeable about the literature and issues surrounding school reform. Counselors need to explore the possibility of including course content that prepares new counselors to implement and evaluate school restructuring activities. It suggests that further studies addressing the extent to which school counselors are involved in urban school restructuring efforts would be helpful. Research on experiences of counselors who have participated in school restructuring programs such as EQUITY 2000 and the Coalition of Essential Schools could also be helpful. (Contains 24 references.) (JDM)

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Examining Urban School Counseling Professionals' Perceptions of School Restructuring Activities

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Abstract

This is a descriptive study examining urban school counseling professionals' perceptions of school restructuring activities (e.g., school-based management, community-school partnerships, school-based family counseling). Professional school counseling professionals (N = 102) working in urban school districts were surveyed. The results suggest that urban school counseling professionals agree that they should be involved in typical school restructuring activities. Implications for school counseling practice and research are discussed.

Examining Urban School Counseling Professionals' Perceptions of School Restructuring Activities

Dissatisfaction with public education has led to a call for major restructuring and reform of American schools (Hollins & Spencer, 1990; Lipman, 1998; Murphy & Hallinger, 1993; Prestine & Bowen, 1993). Nationally, schools have engaged in efforts to restructure their governance and organizational structures in order to better meet the academic needs of all students, particularly economically disadvantaged and minority urban youth (Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990). According to McDonnell (1989), the four major approaches to school restructuring include: (a) decentralizing authority over schooling through school-based management; (b) holding schools more accountable through the use of mechanisms that publicly report on varied aspects of school and student performance; (c) altering the content and process of classroom instruction through major revision of curriculum and teaching methods; and (d) strengthening the links between schools and the larger community through formal alliances with parents, social service and health agencies, businesses, and other institutions. For failing urban schools, these school restructuring approaches offer great promise because it takes into account systemic change that includes input from administrators, teachers, parents, students, community members, and other school personnel (Smith & O'Day, 1990).

While the issue of school restructuring is receiving prominent attention, the difficulties in implementing such change are well-documented (Hall & Hord, 1987; Zaltmen & Duncan, 1977). Barriers such as resistance from school personnel (Zetlin & Lim, 1998) and the inability to identify the causes of problems within the educational system (McDonnell, 1989) are typical in the restructuring process. In addition, reports of decaying facilities, violent communities, poor community resources, and unqualified teachers make the challenge of urban school restructuring seem insurmountable (Kozol, 1991; Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996).

The role of school counselors in the urban school restructuring process has received some attention. Over twenty years ago, Menacker (1974) stressed the importance of urban school counselors affecting social change and in particular, the immediate school community. He

recommended that when transforming educational practices in urban schools, school counselors should take an activist role in which they are to act as community resource specialists and primarily work on collaborative types of activities. More recently, Equity 2000, a school restructuring initiative funded through the College Board, emphasized the role of school counselors' involvement with school-community partnerships, analysis of student profiles, and increased family and parent involvement (Fields, 1997). In addition, EQUITY 2000 provides on-going professional development training for school counselors to increase their expectations for minority and economically disadvantaged students (Matthews, 1997). Others (e.g., Hinkle, & Wells, 1995; Merrill, Clark, Varvil, Van Sickle, & McCall, 1992) have noted that within the context of school restructuring, school counselors and psychologists can play an active role by working with families or implementing family counseling. For instance, Evans and Carter (1997) suggested that school counselors expand their role in urban schools by providing school-based family counseling. School-based family counseling, according to Evans and Carter, offers a tremendous opportunity for urban school counselors to not only address children's school problems but to build school-family-community connections.

Despite these discussions about the role of urban school counselors in the school restructuring process, there is little empirical research indicating urban school counselors' perceptions of school restructuring activities. Given this lack of literature covering the school counselor's role and function in urban school restructuring, the present study examined urban school counselors' perceptions of school restructuring activities such as participating on school-based management teams, implementing family counseling, and developing counseling programs to assist minority student achievement.

Method

Participants

A sample of 269 school counseling professionals living in six U. S. east coast urban areas (i.e., New York City, Newark NJ, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Baltimore, and Trenton, NJ) was drawn from the American School Counselors' Association 1999-2000 membership roster. A

total of 102 (38%) usable questionnaires were returned. Of the 102 participants, 77 (75%) reported that they currently work as school counselors, 7 (7%) as counselor educators, 6 (6%) as guidance supervisors, and 12 (12%) reported "other." Twenty-seven (27%) participants reported that they work in a high school setting, 17 (17%) in a middle school, 33 (32%) in an elementary school, 6 (6%) reported that they work in all settings, and 16 (16%) reported "other." Interestingly, 74 (73%) of the respondents reported that they work in public school settings, 21 (21%) in private schools, 1 (1%) in a charter school, and 6 (6%) in "other." Regarding educational background, 89 (87%) of the participants have a master's degree, 7 (7%) have a doctorate, and 6 (6%) reported "other." Sixty-eight (67%) of the participants reported their ethnic background as White/European American, 24 (24%) as African American/Black, 1 (1%) as Asian, 5 (5%) as Hispanic, and 3 (3%) as "other." Seventy-six (75%) of the respondents were female.

Instrument

The Urban School Counselor Questionnaire was developed to determine urban school counselors' perceptions of school counseling, school restructuring activities, and urban students' needs. The items were developed based on the literature pertaining to urban education and urban school counseling. In addition, the literature pertaining to urban school reform and restructuring was also reviewed for the inclusion of items related to those topics. After the development of items, feedback on the content and format of the questionnaire was solicited from four school counselor educators working at colleges and/or universities in urban areas. As a result of their recommendations, format, content, and wording changes were made to the initial questionnaire. The items on the revised questionnaire were divided into three sections: Demographic Information, School Counseling in An Urban School District, and Beliefs and Attitudes About School Counseling and School Restructuring. The Demographic Information section included items that asked the participants to identify their current job position, school setting, type of school, highest earned degree, ethnic background, gender, years of experience, accreditation status

of graduate program, and area of specialization (e.g., school counseling, community agency, rehabilitation).

The second section (School Counseling in An Urban School District) consisted of 10 items which required the participants to give such information as the number of students enrolled in their school, number of students in caseload, ethnic make-up of school population, most prevalent issue/concern for students, second most prevalent issue, and percentage of time implementing counselor activities. The participants were also asked to respond to the statements, "What I like most about being a school counselor in an urban school district is...." And "What I like least about being a school counselor in an urban school district is..." Two additional items addressed the participants' perception of their effectiveness as a school counselor and what they are most proud of as an urban school counselor.

The third section (Beliefs and Attitudes About School Counseling) consisted of 25 items. Eleven of the 25 items were based on literature describing school restructuring activities (e.g., "School counselors should be members of site-based management teams." "School counselors should be able to implement family counseling."). The results of those 11 items will be reported in this article. The participants were asked to assess their agreement with each of the items. Their agreement was rated using a 5-point Likert scale, 5 = strongly disagree, 4 = disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, 2 = agree, and 1 = strongly agree.

Procedure

The Urban School Counselor Questionnaire was mailed to 269 professional school counseling professionals living in an urban area along with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and instructions for completion of the instrument. A self-addressed stamped envelope was included to encourage return of the surveys. Follow-up questionnaires were mailed three weeks later to the school counselors who had not responded.

Results

The results were analyzed using SPSS statistical package. Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were computed for all items. The ratings of agreement for each item related

to school restructuring activities (i.e., 11 items) are shown in Table 1. Overall, the respondents responded that they agree with school counselors' involvement in school restructuring activities. The mean responses (1.66 and 1.67) for the statements "School counselors should understand the nature of school climate and its impact on teaching and learning" and "School counselors should be able to participate in school-level decision making" denoted the highest agreement, respectively. In contrast, the respondents had the least agreement with the statements "School counselors should spend a considerable amount of time building partnerships with community members, organizations, and businesses" (3.01) and "School counselors should be able to implement family counseling" (2.87).

Post-Hoc Analyses

A set of analyses was used to determine if urban school counselors' perceptions of school restructuring activities were related to demographic variables (e.g., school level, ethnicity, years of experience, type of school). There were no significant relationships between the school counselors' perceptions and the demographic variables.

Discussion

This study involved several limitations that affect the generalizability of the results. Perhaps the primary limitation of this study is its self-report nature. The responses may reflect the respondents' desire to be "politically correct" in their perceptions of school counselor activities and beliefs. Another limitation is the fact that the findings only reflect the perceptions of urban school counselors and counseling professionals who are members of ASCA. School counselors who are not members of ASCA could possibly have different perceptions. Also, the inclusion of counseling professionals (e.g., counselor educators, guidance supervisors) may affect the generalizability of the results to practicing school counselors.

In an effort to further the understanding of the urban school counselor's role in the school restructuring process, this study describes urban school counselors' perceptions of typical school restructuring activities. The findings of this descriptive study suggest that urban school counselors agree that they should be involved in typical school restructuring activities such as

understanding the nature of school climate, participating on school-based management teams, and being a participant in school-level decision-making. Since school restructuring efforts are dependent on the commitment of school personnel (David, Purkey, & White, 1989), these results are encouraging. One might conclude then that urban school counselors are supportive of school restructuring efforts. Nevertheless, this study raises questions regarding the extent to which urban school counselors are actually involved in these restructuring activities.

Despite the overall positive results of this study, the respondents in this study were less agreeable about urban school counselors spending considerable time building partnerships with community members, organizations, and businesses, and implementing family counseling. This could be problematic since many school restructuring efforts call for extensive partnerships with community members, businesses, and organizations (Comer, 1988; Elmore & Associates, 1990). If these results are accurate and urban school counselors are not willing to spend a significant amount of time building community partnerships, then one might ask, "Does this belief or attitude affect how other school personnel perceive school counselors in urban schools? Better yet, does it affect urban school counselors' viability and professional identity in urban schools? Surely, these are questions that must be explored in the near future.

The notion of urban school counselors being able to implement family counseling has received a considerable amount of attention in recent years (e.g., Hinkle & Wells, 1995; Carter & Evans, 1997). From the results of this study, it appears that urban school counselors are somewhat unsure of their role as implementers of family counseling. Perhaps this is true because school counselors generally lack training in this area. For instance, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2000), the accrediting body for school counseling programs, does not require that school counseling graduate programs include course content or internship experience in family counseling or family interventions. Given the emphasis placed on family involvement and counseling by school restructuring initiatives, it is possible that this is an area that should be explored by school counseling professionals and accreditation boards.

It is important to note that the results of this study suggest that urban school counseling professionals' perceptions of school restructuring are not related to their years of experience, school setting, or ethnicity. Although there has been no previous research to suggest that these variables affect school counselors' willingness to participate in school restructuring activities, it is encouraging that these preliminary findings indicate no significant relationships. Therefore, one can imply that urban school counselors, regardless of their years of experience, school setting, and ethnicity, feel favorably about participating in school restructuring activities and efforts.

Implications

Several implications for urban school counseling practice, preparation and research may be drawn from the results of this study. First, since school restructuring has become an important process in many urban schools, school counselors might benefit by becoming more knowledgeable of the literature and issues surrounding school reform and restructuring. For instance, district-wide professional development on school restructuring approaches would be advantageous for school counselors with little or no knowledge of the process. Likewise, inviting school counselors who have been involved in school restructuring to share their experiences with other counselors would seem relevant and appropriate for urban school districts heavily involved in school restructuring initiatives.

Secondly, it seems fitting for urban school counselor educators to explore the possibility of including course content that prepares new counselors to implement and evaluate school restructuring activities. For instance, urban school counselor educators might consider the inclusion of family counseling in their training programs. If urban school restructuring initiatives expect counselors to implement counseling for families, then it would be appropriate for beginning counselors to be trained in this area. Furthermore, counselor educators in urban areas should consider incorporating and providing experiences (i.e., internships, practica) which enable school counseling trainees to observe and work with school counselors involved in restructuring activities (e.g., school-based family counseling and school-family-community partnerships).

And finally, because the current study did not address the extent to which school counselors are involved in urban school restructuring efforts, further studies examining school counselors' current involvement in urban school restructuring is greatly needed. Perhaps case studies of counselors who work in urban schools involved in school restructuring initiatives would shed some light on the role of school counselors in this process. Similarly, future research and information on the experiences of school counselors who have participated in such school restructuring programs as EQUITY 2000 and the Coalition of Essential Schools would be beneficial.

Conclusion

School restructuring has become the "buzzword" in educational reform discourse, especially for those who work in urban schools. Restructuring involves more systemic change, which often means administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community members are involved in how the school works (Smith & O'Day, 1991). It has only been in recent years that the contributions of school counselors in the restructuring process have been discussed (e.g., Stickel, 1999). Clearly further research is greatly needed to further our understanding of the urban school counselor's role and contributions in school restructuring. Hopefully, the findings of this study will encourage school counselors, particularly urban school counselors, to document and share their experiences and knowledge of working within the context of school restructuring initiatives.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Urban School Counselors' Agreement With School Restructuring Items

Item	M	SD
School counselors should be members of site-based management teams.	1.95	1.01
School counselors should collaborate with local social services organizations.	1.84	.84
School counselors should help teachers and/or other school personnel to understand the psychological characteristics of diverse learners and their social environments.	1.87	1.34
School counselors should be able to participate in school-level decision making.	1.67	.86
School counselors should initiate guidance and/or counseling activities that are designed to increase the academic achievement of minority students.	2.07	1.09
School counselors should be able to implement family counseling.	2.87	1.09
School counselors should spend a considerable amount of time building partnerships with community members, organizations, and businesses.	3.01	1.25
School counselors should develop programs and activities designed to eliminate institutional barriers for low-income students and students of color.	2.47	1.06
School counselors should assist in developing profiles of students' strengths and weaknesses.	2.08	.87
School counselors should understand the nature of school climate and its impact on teaching and learning.	1.64	.78

School counselors should offer psychological insights into the needs of students who are provided with special education opportunities.	2.51	.99

Note: 5 = strongly disagree, 4 = disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, 2 = agree, and 1 = strongly agree.